



BRIDGE TO EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS ACT

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What is the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act?

The Commission on Education Finance, Equity, and Excellence (also known as the Thornton Commission after its chair, Dr. Alvin Thornton) examined Maryland's school finance system and found the state's method of calculating and distributing funds to local school systems unnecessarily complex, administratively burdensome, and not appropriately related to the needs of students or the ability of local school systems to meet those needs. The study also found a gap between the amount of money schools actually received and the amount estimated that they would need to help students meet the state's academic standards.

The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act (Senate Bill 856) is legislation passed by the Maryland General Assembly during its 2002 session. The Act addressed the Commission's findings by restructuring Maryland's public school finance system and increasing state aid to public schools by \$1.3 billion over six fiscal years (FY 2003 through FY 2008).

How does the Act work?

The Act created a new finance structure and funding formula, which links resources to students' needs and distributes 74 percent of state aid inverse to local wealth, so poorer school systems receive relatively more state aid than wealthier school systems. (But no school system will receive less state aid than it did under the old formula.) The Act also contains strong accountability provisions. Under the Act, the state will set academic performance standards, provide schools and students adequate resources to meet the standards, and then hold schools and school systems accountable for student performance. Local school systems will have flexibility in spending, but they must submit annual plans that detail their strategies for improving academic achievement for all students, and they must show progress in meeting state performance standards.

What is the new finance structure?

More money and flexibility

Maryland has 24 public school systems, one system for each of the 23 counties and one for Baltimore City. Each school system is funded locally through the county (or city) budget and through the state. The Bridge to Excellence Act increases the amount of money the state gives to local school systems to educate children. It also collapses 27 existing state funding programs into four programs, giving school systems more flexibility in spending.

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What is the new finance structure?

New method of distributing money

The Act establishes a new formula for calculating how much money each school system will receive from the state. Under the new formula, school systems will receive a minimum amount per student, plus additional funds based on the numbers of students who receive special education services, have limited English proficiency, or qualify for free or reduced-price meals, an indicator of poverty. Because it costs more to educate a child in some areas of the state than others, a geographic cost of education index must be developed and applied to the state's education finance formula by fiscal year 2005. The Act calls for the Department to contract with a private entity to develop the geographic cost of education index.

Additional provisions of the Act

- The Act gives additional money to low-wealth districts that provide more local funding than required. This serves as an incentive for counties to invest as much as possible in public education.
- State money for student transportation will increase for 15 school systems to recognize enrollment increases, and grants for students who require special transportation services will increase from \$500 to \$1,000 per rider over the six-year period.

Are there restrictions on how school systems spend the money?

School systems can decide how to spend the money, as long as the system demonstrates improvement in student achievement and develops a satisfactory "master plan." The Act does require that each school system:

- Implement full-day kindergarten by fiscal year 2008.
- Offer pre-kindergarten programs to all at-risk students by fiscal year 2008. (The Act defines at-risk students as students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.)
- Submit to the state (by October 1, 2003) a five-year master plan that documents the school system's goals and strategies for improving achievement among *all* students.

What is a master plan?

By October 1, 2003 each school system must submit to the state a five-year master plan documenting its goals and strategies for improving achievement among *all* groups of students, including students receiving special education services, students with limited English proficiency, students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and other groups as defined by the State Superintendent of Schools.

Plans must include goals that are aligned with state standards, implementation strategies with timelines, and methods for measuring progress toward meeting goals. If any segment of the student population fails to show progress toward meeting performance standards, the State Superintendent must review the master plan and may require the school system to make changes to its plan. The State Board of Education has the authority to review and approve the allocation of resources in school systems that fail to improve student performance *and* fail to develop a satisfactory master plan.